

The Fulani are not from the Middle East

In a recent issue of PNAS, Scheinfeldt et al. (1) maintained that, although Fulani mtDNA is consistent with a West African origin, the linguistic and nonrecombinant portion of the Y chromosome (NRY) supports a Middle Eastern origin for this population. Although this is their opinion, the linguistic and genetic evidence fails to support this conclusion.

The Fulani speak a Niger-Congo language. They probably came to West Africa from Nubia. Welmers (2) explained that the Niger-Congo homeland was in the vicinity of the upper Nile valley, not Niger Basin. The archaeological evidence supports this view, indicating that only in the past 3 ky did people begin to occupy the Niger Basin.

Rosa et al. (3) noted that most Niger-Congo speakers like the Mande and Balanta carry the E3a-M2 gene, whereas a number of Felupe-Djola, Papel, Fulbe, and Mande carry the M3b*-M35 gene, the same as many people in the Sudan.

In addition to haplogroup E3, we also find some carriers of R1*-M173. Most carriers of Y chromosome M173 in Africa speak Niger-Congo languages (Fig. 1).

Coia et al. (4) provide substantial data that the presence of R1*-M173 did not follow the spread of mtDNA haplogroup U6 in sub-Saharan Africa, which is found in North Africa. These authors suggest that R1*-M173 may not be the result of back migration from Asia if this theory depends on the spread of haplogroup U6 in areas where R1*-M173 is found (4).

Authors (5) of a study on Fulani Y chromosomes found that, although the R1*-M173 lineage is found in high frequencies among some Fulani, African-specific haplotypes including M35,

M2, and M33 predominate (5), and not Eurasian markers as maintained in the paper by Scheinfeldt et al. (1).

In conclusion, the linguistic and genetic evidence makes it clear that the Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo languages are related (5) and that Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo speakers carry the Y chromosomes M3b*-M35 and R1*-M173, an indicator for the earlier presence of speakers of this language in an original Nile Valley homeland.

It is also clear that the Fulani language is genetically related to languages in the Niger-Congo Superfamily and has no relationship to any languages spoken in Eurasia. Granted, analyses of the Fulani mtDNA and Y chromosome markers include some Eurasian genetics, but African genetic markers predominate among the Fulani (4, 5). The archaeogenetic and linguistic data make it clear that the Fulani are not of Eurasian origin as suggested by Scheinfeldt et al. (1).

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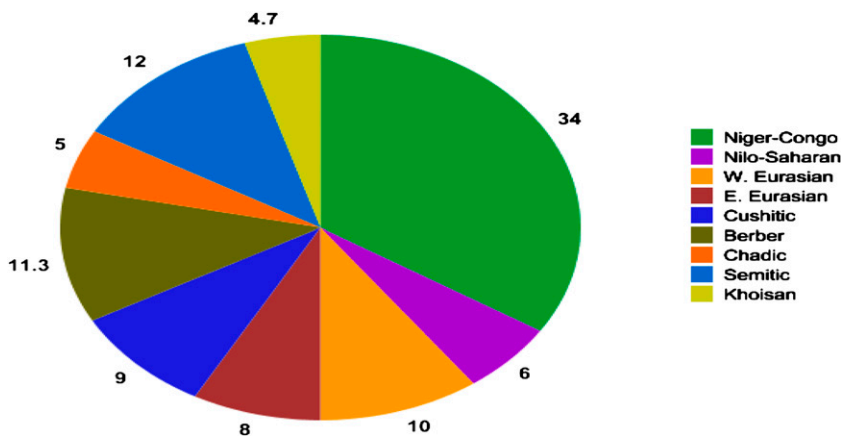


Fig. 1. Frequencies of Y chromosome M-173 (R1b*) in Africa and Eurasia based on demographics in ref. 6.